

ON DRUMS

Getting Your Tempo Straight

Rock-steady —
that's what it's
all about.

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ONE OF THE MAIN functions of a drummer is to establish a steady tempo for the other players in the band, as well as for the dancers on the floor. While a strict, sterile tempo without feel is not natural, neither is an erratic, shifting tempo. Your goal as a drummer is to become rhythmically accurate while retaining the feel and groove, without speeding up or slowing down.

There are many ways you can work to achieve steady tempo in your playing — the

most obvious is to work with a metronome. There are both electronic and mechanical metronomes—I'd recommend one of the battery-powered electronic types, since the mechanical, key-wound models are apt to get slower as they wind down. Constant practicing with a metronome will get you accustomed to a steady tempo. You must follow the metronome, because it won't follow you!

A good exercise to establish the feel of an unfaltering tempo in your head is to just sit and listen to the metronome doing its thing. After a while, you'll have its regularity engraved in your mind. If you start hearing it in your sleep, it might be time to take a break.

If you can read drum music, try playing passages from various snare drum books with the metronome, and change speed every so often. Some good books to try this with are Ted Reed's *Syncopation* and George Stone's *Stick Control*. You can set up the metronome to beat either quarter notes (72-96), or eighth notes (152-200) while you play the various patterns.

Another great exercise (difficult for some) is to set the metronome at an extremely slow speed (40-46) and play a simple rock-beat (like snare on 2 and 4, kick on 1 and 3, hi-hat playing eighths) for five or ten minutes straight. It's easy to grab tempos at quicker speeds, but at slow speeds it's a different story. Besides just hearing the ticks of the metronome, you must also hear the space between the ticks, as each space will be equal in length. Imagining beats falling precisely in between the

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ticks will help you to feel where the next tick falls.

Playing live drums with a metronome can sometimes be difficult, since the drumming overpowers the metronome sound. Some metronomes have an earphone jack to help balance this out. If yours doesn't, one solution is to tape-record the metronome, and then play it back through stereo headphones. You'll surely hear it then, and also get a feel for what it's like working with a studio click track.

Drum machines are also useful in developing good tempo or correcting existing tempo problems. Program your drum machine to play various patterns at one tempo (be sure to quantize for any human programming errors!), and then play complimentary patterns along with it, or duplicate it. You can trade fours with it by constructing a "song," a repetitive sequence of four bars of machine, four bars of blank space—the blank part is for you to play through, with or without the machine's audible click. If your tempo is even, the machine will come back precisely on your next downbeat.

Playing along with records, CDs, or tapes can also help, if the recording you choose is not a live performance. Many records are done in the studio with a click track, but a live

recording may possibly have faults in tempo. (Speaking of click tracks, if you plan to get into studio work, it's best to get used to playing with a click now, rather than on someone else's time and money.)

Some drummers take the metronome outside their practice rooms and use it at gigs. Certain songs require certain tempos to feel right, so some players keep a list of all their band's tunes, with metronome speeds written next to the titles. Before counting off a particular song, the drummer can use the metronome as a tempo reference, either via a small earphone, or via the flashing light on the device. This method guarantees the song tempo will be the same, night after night.

One of the best compliments that can be given to a drummer from other musicians is that he's "solid." All the showmanship and technical know-how in the world will not compensate for spasmodic and erratic tempo. So, if you haven't already started working with a metronome, it's "about time" you did.

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